

# *Probing the limits of Crocean historicism*

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## Probing the limits of Crocean historicism

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### ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the post-war reaction against Benedetto Croce, focusing on the critical reappraisal of Crocean historicism that followed the defeat of Italian Fascism. Motivated by a growing sense of historical uncertainty, Italians increasingly dissented from Croce, but they remained more wedded to Crocean thought – and in particular to Crocean historicism – than has often been argued. Like their predecessors in previous generations, post-war Italian intellectuals positioned themselves dialogically, in constant conversation with Croce's hegemonic philosophy. The antecedents of their reaction against Crocean historicism can therefore be identified in earlier responses to Croce's thought, and in this essay I examine two such responses: those of Antonio Gramsci and Renato Serra. I also examine the contemporary resonances of the (partial) anti-Crocean turn, exemplified by a consequential 1992 debate over Holocaust historiography pitting Carlo Ginzburg against Hayden White. Comparing these various assaults on the 'Crocean citadel of historicist idealism', I argue that the challenge to Croce has been posed most cogently by those whose dissent from his dominant intellectual paradigm was inspired not by outright opposition but rather by doubt and scepticism. In the essay's conclusion, I explore the significance of such scepticism, exemplified by the post-war critique of Crocean historicism, for the ongoing debates over 'probing the limits of representation'.

### SOMMARIO

In questo saggio prendo in considerazione la reazione contro Benedetto Croce nel periodo postbellico, concentrandomi sulla rivalutazione critica dello storicismo crociano dopo la sconfitta del fascismo italiano. Spinti dall'incertezza storica del dopoguerra, gli intellettuali italiani in quel periodo dissentirono da Croce, ma rimasero più condizionati dalla filosofia crociana – e in particolare dallo storicismo crociano – di quanto è stato riconosciuto dalla maggior parte della critica. Come i loro predecessori nelle generazioni precedenti, gli intellettuali del dopoguerra si sono stabiliti culturalmente in maniera dialogica, e cioè in conversazione costante con la filosofia egemonica di Croce. Gli antecedenti della loro reazione allo storicismo crociano, quindi, possono essere identificati nelle risposte al pensiero di Croce formulate in generazioni passate, e in questo saggio esamino due

### KEYWORDS

Historicism; Benedetto Croce; Giacomo Debenedetti; Carlo Ginzburg; Antonio Gramsci; Hayden White

### PAROLE CHIAVE

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risposte esemplificative di questa tendenza: quelle di Antonio Gramsci e Renato Serra. Inoltre, prendo in considerazione le risonanze contemporanee della tendenza (parzialmente) anti-crociana, rintracciabili nell'importante dibattito avvenuto nel 1992 sulla storiografia della Shoah, in cui Carlo Ginzburg critica fortemente la posizione di Hayden White. Paragonando questi diversi attacchi alla 'cittadella crociana dello storicismo idealistico', sostengo che la sfida a Croce è stata posta in modo più convincente non dagli intellettuali spinti da un'opposizione intellettuale totale, ma invece da quelli motivati da dubbio e da scetticismo. Nella conclusione del saggio, esamino il significato di quello scetticismo, esemplificato dalla critica postbellica allo storicismo crociano, per i dibattiti in corso sulla possibilità di 'indagare i limiti della rappresentazione'.

'There is an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena', argued Hayden White in his contribution to the influential 1990 conference dedicated to 'Probing the Limits of Representation'.<sup>1</sup> It was opposition to precisely this sort of sentiment that had provided the impetus for the conference, whose aim was to confront White with the potential consequences of his subjectivist approach to historiography. To many of the conference's attendees, including its organiser, Saul Friedländer, White's approach seemed to suggest one particularly noxious consequence: they thought it invited and perhaps even legitimated Holocaust denial. Friedländer had convened the conference, in fact, in order to invite reflections on whether White's tropological emphasis on the structure of historical narrative over the substance of historical fact would undermine the ability, as one critic has put it, 'to guard the historical integrity of the Holocaust's facticity'.<sup>2</sup>

Among those who sought to reassert that facticity, Carlo Ginzburg took a unique approach, attempting to historicize White's position and in this way to reposition the symposium on the Holocaust's challenge to postmodernism as a referendum on the legacy of Italian neo-idealism. White had claimed to echo Benedetto Croce's 1893 essay 'La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte' in arguing that historical 'events are real not because they occurred but because, first, they were remembered and, second, they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence'.<sup>3</sup> Seizing on such statements, Ginzburg sought to destabilize White's allegedly Crocean position by invoking the argument of one of Croce's contemporaries, the literary critic Renato Serra, and asserting, against White's 'inextinguishable relativity', that 'reality [...] exists', that there is a 'cosa in sé', as Serra had once argued against Croce.<sup>4</sup> This was a decidedly counter-intuitive line of attack. Serra's response to Croce, which Ginzburg invoked in an attempt to re-assert the Holocaust's historical facticity, was in its original context an attempt to convey a sense of historical uncertainty, to hold up for scrutiny Croce's confident pronouncements on historical methodology, and to suggest a certain scepticism regarding the historian's capacity to grasp historical reality. Serra expressed doubts about the hegemonic notion of idealist historicism that Croce had articulated.<sup>5</sup> Ginzburg claimed to find in that expression of doubt the inspiration for a defence of the incontrovertible reality of history.

The essay that follows explores the historical foundations and theoretical implications of this clash between sceptical realism and idealist historicism. Like Ginzburg, I focus on the challenge to historicism posed by the Second World War and the Holocaust; like Ginzburg, as well, I emphasize the significance of the Serra–Croce debate. Ginzburg, however, looked to Serra to counter what he saw as the Crocean foundations of White's 'skepticism and relativism', insisting that, while 'Serra explicitly rejected simple positivist attitudes', nevertheless 'his remarks help us to reject also a perspective which piles up positivism and relativism', such that Ginzburg is led to conclude that 'an unlimited skeptical attitude toward historical narrative is [...] groundless'.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, I want to argue that it was precisely the sceptical attitude adopted by Serra that provided the most effective opposition to Crocean historicism. Even after the Second World War, as I will outline below, the challenge to Croce's hegemony was posed most cogently not by those who successfully articulated an alternative but rather by those whose uncertainty and scepticism led them tentatively to dissent from the dominant intellectual paradigm of the day. My claim is two-fold: historicism provided the ground on which Croce was challenged; historical uncertainty provided the impetus for that challenge. If the Serra–Croce debate and the subsequent diminution of Croce's intellectual influence have implications for Holocaust historiography, therefore, they may not be entirely aligned with those suggested by Ginzburg.

### **'Un mondo dove niente si perde': Croce and Serra**

Renato Serra's 1912 letter to Croce, which inspired Carlo Ginzburg's riposte to Hayden White, was itself inspired by Croce's essay 'Storia, cronaca e false storie', which had been published earlier the same year. Attempting to explain his precept that 'ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea', Croce had devoted that essay to an exploration of the links between historical documents, historical narration, and the historian's capacity to relate historical truths.<sup>7</sup> He argued that history always had to have a solid empirical foundation, but could not proceed merely from the sterile accumulation of inert facts. 'La storia, staccata dal documento vivo', he explained, 'non è più un atto spirituale, ma una cosa, un complesso di suoni o di altri segni. Ma anche il documento, staccato dalla vita, è nient'altro che una cosa, simile all'altra, un complesso di suoni e di altri segni'.<sup>8</sup> Historical narrative required historical evidence, but so too did historical evidence require historical narrative; one without the other could never result in historical truth. Indeed, one without the other could not even be considered history, since, as Croce put it, 'la storia era nient'altro che quel nesso [di documento e narrazione]'.<sup>9</sup> There is thus no historical reality beyond human understanding, for Croce, no history that exceeds the historian's account. History is historical understanding, which is reality itself. In 'Storia, cronaca e false storie' Croce made this case succinctly, insisting that 'bisogna concepire il rapporto della storia con la vita come un rapporto di unità'.<sup>10</sup> For Croce, the entirety of life is history and history an entirely living thing. The task of the historian is thus nothing more nor less than to explain in its essence the creation of the contemporary world. This requires intuition, Croce insisted, the power to understand and to re-construct the history that has produced the present moment.<sup>11</sup> That is why, for Croce, history is an art rather than a science, and why all history is contemporary history.

It is also why Croce had little time for philologists or positivists, whom he charged with accumulating dead facts rather than encountering – and recounting – living history. The problem with such an approach, for Croce, was that it mistook information for comprehension, evidence for knowledge, data for truth. Even as he emphasized the need for an empirical foundation for historiography, therefore, Croce insisted that empiricism itself could produce neither historical understanding nor a valid historical narrative, and he thus contrasted his own absolute historicism with the position advanced, for instance, by Tolstoy, for whom, as Isaiah Berlin explained, history is ‘the sum of empirically discoverable data’.<sup>12</sup> Tolstoy had claimed, in other words, that until all of the facts have been collected, until all experiences have been considered, history will remain incompletely understood and the truth will remain substantially unknown. Here is Croce’s brief against that approach.

Il Tolstoj s’era fisso in questo pensiero che, non solamente nessuno, nemmeno un Napoleone, possa predeterminare l’andamento di una battaglia, ma che nessuno possa conoscere come davvero essa si è svolta [...]. Ma la battaglia è conosciuta via via che si svolge; e poi, col tumulto di essa, si dissipa anche il tumulto di quella conoscenza, solo importando la nuova situazione di fatto e la nuova disposizione d’animo che si è prodotta, e che si esprime nelle poetiche leggende o si aiuta con le artificiose finzioni. E ciascuno di noi conosce ed oblia a ogni istante i più dei suoi pensieri e atti [...]; ma non dimentica, e serba più o meno a lungo, quei pensieri e quei sentimenti, che rappresentano crisi memorabili e problemi aperti pel suo avvenire [...]. Onde è da dire che noi, a ogni istante, conosciamo tutta la storia che c’importa conoscere; e della restante, poiché non c’importa, non possediamo le condizioni del conoscerla, o le possederemo quando c’importerà. Quella storia ‘restante’ è l’eterno fantasma della ‘cosa in sé’, che non è né ‘cosa’ né ‘in sé’, ma nient’altro che la proiezione fantastica della infinità del nostro operare e del nostro conoscere.<sup>13</sup>

Croce countenanced neither Tolstoy’s doubt nor his proposed method. Whereas Tolstoy questioned the capacity of historiography to arrive at historical understanding but held out faith in historical fact to yield at least partial knowledge, Croce argued that historiography could convey historical truth, but only if it expressed a creative perception of living reality and avoided Tolstoy’s suggested method, the steady accretion of concrete fact. Historical understanding, for Croce, was a function not of more information but of better intuition, without which no amount of historical data would ever cohere into a true history.

Sympathetic to Tolstoy’s arguments and unconvinced by Croce’s response, Renato Serra responded with his own exploration of historical truth. In the 1912 letter to Croce that Ginzburg would invoke in his debate with White, Serra declared himself ‘uno “schiavo della cosa in sé”, a devotee of the Tolstoyan notion of historical truth that Croce had called into question.<sup>14</sup> Yet Serra did not so much break with Croce, on this occasion, as lament his inability to maintain the historical assuredness, the unwavering confidence in the historian’s intuition, that was a bedrock principle of Crocean historicism. Serra thus gave voice to his dissatisfaction with Croce’s theory, which struck him, in some key respects, as inadequate for his own historical imagination.<sup>15</sup> ‘[N]on nego che la soluzione si possa trovare, per la strada ch’Ella mi mostra’, he explained, ‘ma io non ci arrivo, ora’.<sup>16</sup> Serra did not seek to refute Croce, only to argue that Croce had not refuted Tolstoy.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, he did not seek to offer a corrective to Crocean historicism, only to suggest why and to what extent Crocean historicism required a corrective.

Serra located the possible grounds for that corrective in his own reflections on historical fact and historical narration, which he had developed in a 1912 essay entitled 'Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la Libia'. In this evocative text, Serra considered the historical connotations of a group of soldiers he had encountered at the train station in Cesena, where they were awaiting their deployment in the Italo-Turkish War. He insisted that the experiences of these soldiers – their thoughts and feelings, their fears and motivations, their particular contributions to the cause – would inevitably be lost to history. The war itself would thus exceed all of the narratives that might seek to record it. 'Nessuno può raccontare', Serra argued. 'Nessuno sa'. Even the soldiers themselves would prove incapable of capturing the true nature of their experience of history. 'Quelli che torneranno viventi, anneriti e storditi dai lunghi mesi di guerra, ne sapranno meno di quelli che non tornano, che giacciono sotto la sabbia', he maintained.<sup>18</sup> To the extent that this is true, there will remain an unbridgeable gap between any historical episode and the historical narrative in which it is recounted. Fixated on historical particularity, on the irreducibility of historical experience, on the historical truth that will inevitably escape historical transcription, Serra insisted on a necessary distinction between history and memory, between historiography and reality, between account and event.<sup>19</sup> As he put it:

Tutte le critiche che facciamo alla storia implicano il concetto della storia vera, della realtà assoluta. Bisogna affrontare la questione della memoria; non in quanto è dimenticanza, ma in quanto è memoria. Esistenza delle cose in sé. Il senso del perdere, del non poter ricordare né dire né comprendere tutto, il senso delle cose che sfuggono alla coscienza ferma in un punto, che si perdono, che vengono meno, che non potremo far rivivere più, ha la sua radice in un mondo dove niente si perde: nell'eterno, che anche entrando nel nostro tempo e diventando effimero, resta pure, in sé, eterno.<sup>20</sup>

Croce had argued that we know all of the history we need in any given historical moment; Serra expressed real doubt about this claim, even as he admitted that he could not disprove it.

He did not so much have an opposing historical theory as a lingering uncertainty, a deeply felt anxiety at the thought of historical loss. Whereas Fausto Curi has identified a 'positivismo critico' in Serra's essays, therefore, I am more convinced by Ezio Raimondi's description of Serra as a 'positivista in crisi'.<sup>21</sup> Serra had no more confidence in a scientific approach to historical fact than did Croce, yet he remained fixated on the 'cosa in sé', the essence of historical truth, the excess that escapes historical narration – an excess whose existence appeared not to trouble Croce, with his absolute faith in absolute historicism.

Burdened by doubt where Croce was buoyed by confidence, Serra faced a crisis symptomatic of the intellectual tenor of the times, when Italian intellectuals began to express with increasing insistence their inability to share in Croce's assured convictions. Writing in a period dominated by Croce's intellectual influence, a period that has been described, with only slight exaggeration, as 'il regno di Benedetto Croce', Serra was struggling against an intellectual orthodoxy.<sup>22</sup> He was far from alone in this struggle. What Leonardo Lattarulo said of the first fifteen years of the century, in fact, is equally true of the entirety of what has been called 'il cinquantennio crociano': 'se di egemonia crociana si deve parlare in questa fase, va detto che essa non è mai stata pacifica e che

invece è stata costantemente contrasta e discussa'.<sup>23</sup> Even before Serra had sent his letter to Croce, for example, Giovanni Papini had already articulated, in even more provocative terms, his own dissatisfaction with Croce's seeming inability to admit of any doubt.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, for Serra, for Papini, and for most of their contemporaries, Croce remained the point of reference, the cultural touchstone, for virtually every expression of the growing sense of cultural instability that was invariably (and perhaps inevitably) advanced in Crocean terms. Italian intellectuals thus positioned themselves dialogically, in constant conversation with Croce's hegemonic ideology.<sup>25</sup> Croce effectively provided the standards and expectations against which they could formulate their alternatives, whose connotations and implications could be perceived fully only in opposition to the Crocean conventions. As Giuseppe Prezzolini argued about Croce's standing at the time, therefore, '[l]a guerra ha aperto una pausa per la sua popolarità, ma non ha, si capisce, diminuito la sua grandezza'.<sup>26</sup> Crocean thought was indispensable even to Croce's opponents, and as a result it retained its significance, and its cultural centrality, even – and perhaps especially – as it fostered intellectual resistance. That was Prezzolini's claim in 1922, in reference to Croce's position after the First World War, the period of Croce's second major decline. The same could have been said – indeed, the same was said – some twenty years later, about Croce's standing after the Second World War, and his third major decline, his 'terzo tramonto'.<sup>27</sup>

### **'Uscire dal Croce per le strade da lui tracciate': historicism after Fascism**

Like their counterparts two decades earlier, Italian intellectuals after 1945 rebelled against the hegemonic influence of Crocean aesthetics and politics, Crocean neo-idealism and absolute historicism. Theirs was a political as well as an intellectual rebellion. Before and throughout the war Croce had been a leading voice of anti-Fascism, emboldening opposition to Italy's totalitarian regime with his 1925 anti-Fascist manifesto, a document that Francesco Flora, one of Croce's followers and admirers, justly celebrated as 'l'alta protesta della cultura italiana contro le barbarie degli avventurieri'.<sup>28</sup> While Flora's words of admiration suggest something of the significance of Croce's exemplary anti-Fascism, however, they also point towards what came to be recognized as its limitations. For Croce's post-war critics asserted that while he had resisted – and had inspired others to resist – the rise of Fascism, he had done so largely by designating culture an independent, apolitical sphere, separate from and impervious to the incursions of social conflict. As opposition to Fascism coalesced into armed revolt, this solution increasingly seemed too passive, too ineffectual, too compromised. Fabrizio Onofri, one of the leaders of the anti-Fascist Resistance in Rome, thus spoke for many after the war when he dubbed Croce's 'il manifesto di quello che va senz'altro chiamato il *fallimento della cultura e dell'arte*, e che consiste, per dirla in una sola parola, nella completa *irresponsabilità* dello scrittore e dell'artista'.<sup>29</sup> Those who shared Onofri's convictions believed that it was the duty of intellectuals not to remain aloof from politics, as Croce had argued, but instead to enter the political fray and to pursue concrete, material change. As a result, they began to find inadequate Croce's rejection of Fascism, which no longer seemed to provide a sufficient model of oppositional politics. Gaetano Salvemini put the case clearly: 'il no di Croce rimase sempre un no quietista; non diventò mai il no attivista di chi rischia il pane, la libertà e magari la



vita'.<sup>30</sup> Intellectuals now wanted something more. 'Una volta operato il distacco dal fascismo il liberalismo crociano non indicava una via da percorrere, delle mète da conquistare con lotte e sacrifici', declared the mathematician and Communist politician Lucio Lombardo-Radice; 'il grande vecchio non sta più davanti a noi come una mèta o un faro', announced the archaeologist and art historian Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli.<sup>31</sup> The break with Croce thus became a kind of foundation, an inauguration for the intellectual and political work of the post-war period.

That break was often expressed vituperatively, as critics made clear their rejection of what was termed the 'dittatura crociana', the 'dittatura dell'idealismo', 'assolutismo crociano' – loaded terms that suggest a confluence between Croce's reign and that of Mussolini.<sup>32</sup> It was argued not only that Croce had failed adequately to oppose Italian Fascism but also that he bore some responsibility for its totalitarian rule. The philosopher Remo Cantoni was among the first to level this charge, which he defended by insisting that Crocean idealism had indeed represented 'una *dittatura logica*', controlling the thought of cultured Italians and inducing in them a form of quietism, of historical resignation before the crimes of Fascism.<sup>33</sup> In somewhat more moderate terms, the one-time Crocean acolyte Luigi Russo made a similar point, explaining that Croce's

nobiltà [ ... ], esaltata nelle nostre vene in tutti i modi [ ... ], valse a trattenerci dalla dilagante corruttela del fascismo, e ci creammo un po' tutti, subito, proprio per merito del Croce, il ruolo scoperto degli oppositori; ma crollato il regime fascista, già nell'estate del '45, chi più chi meno, eravamo entrati in crisi. Il Croce, no; egli non si avvedeva che il crollo della dittatura di Mussolini e di Gentile era stato il crollo anche della sua anti-dittatura [ ... ]. Egli insisteva come oggi insiste nel suo orgoglio storicistico; e [ ... ] si ritiene chiamato a dare una direzione spirituale a tutti gli italiani.<sup>34</sup>

Russo's argument, like Cantoni's, was one of the many signs of the post-war siege on the 'Crocean citadel of historicist idealism', which no longer appeared durable, let alone impregnable, after Fascism.<sup>35</sup>

Faced with a historical crisis, Italian intellectuals began to find Croce's idealist historicism unaccountably passive, inert. It seemed not only to disregard the crisis but even to condone it. After all, if there is an underlying order to history then historical crises, too, have a role to play in the natural unfolding of events. Croce himself had said as much in a 1909 essay.

Lamenteremo noi le stragi di san Bartolomeo o i roghi dell'Inquisizione o le cacciate degli ebrei e dei moreschi o il supplizio del Servet? Lamentiamoli pure; ma serbando chiara coscienza che, a questo modo, si fa poesia e non già storia. Quei fatti sono avvenuti e nessuno può cangiarli; come nessuno può dire che cosa sarebbe avvenuto se non fossero avvenuti. Le espiazioni, che la Francia e la Spagna avrebbero fatte o dovrebbero fare pei pretesi *delicta maiorum*, è frase di vendicativo giudaismo, da lasciarla ai predicatori, priva di qualsiasi significato. La direi perfino immorale, perché da quelle lotte del passato è nato questo nostro mondo presente, che pretenderebbe ora, levarsi di fronte al suo progenitore per insultarlo o, per lo meno, fargli il sermone.<sup>36</sup>

Croce's choice of historical examples, more even than his quietist approach to historical narration, must have seemed intolerable after the Second World War. The philosopher had made himself a hostage to posterity by insisting that the present necessarily serves as justification for the past, and by illustrating this point with the slaughter of European

Jews, which he suggested it would be immoral for historians to lament. It cannot have helped matters that, once news of the Holocaust began to reach Italy, Croce appeared to hold fast to this opinion, offering pronouncements that explicitly paralleled Jews and Nazis as threats to European stability<sup>37</sup> and implicitly advocated a return to 'genteel' anti-Semitism,<sup>38</sup> views so repellent that critics such as Luigi Russo and Palmiro Togliatti were led to accuse him of Jew-hatred.<sup>39</sup> A view of history that appeared to disavow moral judgement while countenancing such poorly judged conclusions was bound to lose adherents after the war. The problem, as the poet and philosopher Guido Ceronetti insisted, was that 'lo storicismo finisce inevitabilmente col dare un crisma di validità storica alle esperienze più tragiche e negative dell'uomo'.<sup>40</sup> Survivors of a historical tragedy that could not readily be redeemed, Italian intellectuals increasingly turned away from a philosophy of history that appeared to condone a state of affairs they no longer wished to tolerate. For those whose political and moral judgements had inspired a rebellion against recent European history, Crocean historicism seemed to have little to offer.

This is not to say, however, that Italian intellectuals in this period rejected historicism *tout court*. Crucially, in fact, the post-war period did not give rise to an anti-historicism so much as to a search for a new historicism. What transpired, then, was a battle pitting 'storicismo contro storicismo', in the words of Cesare Luporini. 'Storicismo marxista e rivoluzionario contro storicismo borghese e idealistico (conservatore o reazionario)'.<sup>41</sup> On one side stood Croce and his followers; on the other, those who believed that a more active, interventionist philosophy of history was needed to replace what the Communist journal *Rinascita* dismissed as the 'Arcadia del[lo...] pseudo-storicismo idealistico'.<sup>42</sup> When the staff of *Società*, in the inaugural issue of that journal, demanded an alternative to Crocean historicism, for instance, they insisted that this had to be fashioned 'senza rinunciare alla storia'. The aim was not anti-historicism, they explained; it was total historicism, characterized by 'un assoluto immanentismo'.<sup>43</sup> In *Rinascita*, Lucio Lombardo Radice made a similar case: 'Il marxismo non è "antistoricismo"', he maintained.<sup>44</sup> On the whole, the arguments mounted against Croce after the war advocated not anti-historicism but rather what the Marxisant critic Natalino Sapegno termed, in a 1945 essay, 'storicismo integrale'.<sup>45</sup> That is, they opposed Croce on the grounds that his supposedly absolute historicism was in fact not absolute at all, that as a result of his idealism it retained supra-historical elements.

Nevertheless, Sapegno recognized that his notion of integral historicism still bore the signs of its origins in Croce's idealist historicism, 'quel metodo crociano, nel quale anch'io, come tutti gli uomini della mia generazione in Italia, mi ero formato ed ero cresciuto', as he put it.<sup>46</sup> This admission takes much of the sting out of Luigi Russo's biting response to Sapegno's essay, in which he chided the critic for his manifestly shifting intellectual allegiances.<sup>47</sup> Sapegno had never claimed otherwise. Undergirding Russo's critique was a question of categorization: if Marxism is historicism, he insisted, then historicists must be Marxists. 'Leggendo l'articolo', Russo thus mockingly asserted, 'mi è avvenuto di esclamare: ahimè io ero marxista e non lo sapevo! Ahimè, anche il Croce era marxista e anche lui non doveva saperlo'.<sup>48</sup> In truth, however, the situation was reversed: it was not that Croce was a Marxist but rather that Italian Marxists were largely Crocean, at least in their intellectual formation.<sup>49</sup> Young Italians in particular were 'oscillante tra Croce e Marx', argued the Socialist politician Piero Caleffi.<sup>50</sup> So, too,

were Marxist intellectuals such as Elio Vittorini, once described by Alberto Asor Rosa as 'molto più vicino a Benedetto Croce che a Marx'.<sup>51</sup> The same was true of Italy's Communist leadership, since even Palmiro Togliatti, head of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), seemed to be 'metà Croce e metà Stalin', in the words of Franco Fortini.<sup>52</sup> Russo was certainly correct to identify a relationship between Italian Marxism and Crocean historicism, therefore, but his polemical intentions led him to misjudge that relationship's philosophical and ideological connotations.

The truth is that Russo need not have reminded his intellectual opponents of their debts to Croce; they readily admitted as much themselves. Despite the mounting dissatisfaction with his theories, Croce remained a primary influence on Italian culture, and Crocean historicism remained hegemonic for at least the next decade.<sup>53</sup> If it was common for post-war Italian periodicals to distance themselves from Croce during this period, it was no less common for them to acknowledge Croce's continuing influence.<sup>54</sup> Of the Catholic left, for instance, Felice Balbo maintained that 'abbiamo in Croce la nostra sia pur lontana e mediata radice'.<sup>55</sup> Of the Communist left, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli said that 'ci riconosciamo debitori al Croce di tanta parte della nostra formazione intellettuale e culturale'.<sup>56</sup> Carlo Cassola, surveying the whole of the Italian intellectual class, could thus declare that 'molti scienziati, storici, filosofi si ingegnarono a risciacquare il proprio vocabolario idealistico nel gran fiume del marxismo'.<sup>57</sup> The continuity of Croce's intellectual hegemony was clear, and clearly conceded.

This state of affairs persisted even as the Italian Communist Party sought to displace Crocean theories through the publication and dissemination of the works of Antonio Gramsci. As the *Quaderni del carcere* were strategically released to the public after the war under the careful supervision of Palmiro Togliatti, Gramsci was presented not only as an alternative to Croce but indeed as the Anti-Croce.<sup>58</sup> When Gramsci himself had reflected at length on the need for an Anti-Croce, however, one modelled on Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, he had done so with a stated awareness of his own significant debts to Crocean philosophy, and in particular to Crocean historicism.<sup>59</sup> After all, he was part of a generation of intellectuals who, as he put it in one of his prison letters, 'partecipavano in tutto o in parte al movimento di riforma morale e intellettuale promosso in Italia da Benedetto Croce'.<sup>60</sup> The first critical notices that Gramsci's writings attracted after the war often highlighted their debts to Croce. In a 1947 review in *Rinascita*, the flagship journal of the Italian Communist Party, Gabriele Pepe argued that from Croce Gramsci 'ha assimilato il più profondo spirito storicistico', insisting, as a result, that he could best be described as 'un discepolo che polemizza col maestro'.<sup>61</sup> In the same year, Paolo Alatri wrote in the Marxist journal *Società* that 'Croce e Gramsci si muovono su un terreno comune', while Massimo Mila argued that Gramsci's was a 'critica crociana in termini crociani'.<sup>62</sup> Gramsci himself advanced largely the same argument, making clear that any effort to supplant Crocean hegemony would require a thorough engagement with Crocean modes of thought, and especially with Crocean historicism. He recommended Marxist historicism on the grounds that it could outstrip Croce on his own terms. In Gramsci's words, 'lo storicismo idealistico crociano rimane ancora nella fase teologico-speculativa', whereas Marxist historicism, he explained, grounded in a philosophy of praxis that drew directly on idealist precedents, represented a 'storicismo assoluto', 'realistico', 'un umanesimo assoluto della storia'.<sup>63</sup> The Marxist position, then, was presented less as the rejection than as the consummation of Croce's historicist ambitions.

Borrowing a phrase from Norberto Bobbio, we might surmise that, across the political and ideological spectrum, post-war Italian culture tended ‘non già verso l’anti-Croce [...] ma verso l’oltre Croce’.<sup>64</sup> Intellectuals sought not to suppress Croce but to supersede him. Many at the time attempted to give expression to the partial, reverential, belaboured conversion that Croce’s decline brought about in Italian culture. ‘Noi oggi dobbiamo liberarci dal fascino che [Croce] ha esercitato per anni sull’animo nostro e, ad esorcizzare l’incanto, dobbiamo ricantilenarci tra noi i suoi tanti difetti’, Giuseppe Petronio argued in a 1947 essay in the journal *Socialismo*. ‘Eppure, appunto per esercitare su quell’opera una critica valida, dobbiamo tener presenti la sua forza e la qualità dei suoi mezzi’.<sup>65</sup> It was believed, in other words, that the only way to move beyond Croce was through a thorough immersion in Croceanism. ‘Riuscire postcroceiani senza essere anticroceiani fu lo sforzo di quegli anni’, explained Gianfranco Contini.<sup>66</sup> The literary critic Giacomo Debenedetti outlined the situation with particular lucidity, insisting that the only hope for a generation of intellectuals dissatisfied with but still dependent on Croceanism had been to ‘uscire dal Croce per le strade da lui tracciate’.<sup>67</sup> That is, as he went on to illustrate, ‘con tecnica, linguaggio e metodologia croceane ci provavamo a forzare le uscite, che la metodologia croceana aveva sperimentate impraticabili’.<sup>68</sup> Debenedetti thus provided what remains the most cogent formulation of the repeated challenges to Crocean hegemony, revealing that the apparent rebellions in fact signalled the perpetuation of Croce’s thought, although with a growing scepticism regarding the rules and tenets Croce himself had imposed.

### **‘Una storia di questa guerra sorda e sotterranea’: Debenedetti, Croce, and Serra**

Giacomo Debenedetti, the author of this epigrammatic account of Italian culture’s dialectical overturning of Crocean hegemony, was also the author of two notable and much-admired early accounts of the Holocaust in Italy. It is my contention that the two efforts were intimately related, that Debenedetti’s attempt to document the assault on the Jews of Rome was shaped by his attempt to ‘uscire dal Croce per le strade da lui tracciate’, such that, in writing the history of the Holocaust in Italy, he was seeking to move beyond the perceived limits of Crocean historicism. It is also my contention that the relationship between Crocean thought and Holocaust historiography exhibited in Debenedetti’s accounts differs meaningfully from that articulated by Carlo Ginzburg in his debate with Hayden White. The nature of that difference merits reflection.

Debenedetti was a literary critic, not a historian or historical theorist, and I would not wish to be mistaken for arguing that he articulated a notion of historicism to be opposed to Croce’s. Rather, he gave expression to the growing sense of scepticism regarding Croce’s precepts, and his doubt and uncertainty determined his approach both to Crocean historicism and to his reporting on the Holocaust. Debenedetti’s 1922 essay ‘Sullo “stile” di Benedetto Croce’, published when the critic was just twenty-one years old, is evidence of his early immersion in Crocean modes of thought, which would continue for decades to exert a significant influence on his work.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, however, Debenedetti consistently refused the orthodoxies of Croce’s followers, and would eventually distance himself from the teachings of Croce as well. When he did so, he was able to explain his rationale with characteristic lucidity, stressing not only

his own but also his generation's need for new ideals as well as new ideas. 'Avevamo un maestro: il Croce', he explained in a 1941 essay, 'ma volgevano appunto gli anni, in cui bene o male si tentava di allargare il campo da lui aperto'.<sup>70</sup> Expanding on this point in his 1949 'Probabile autobiografia di una generazione', Debenedetti maintained:

L'età di cui il Croce, grande epigono, esprime l'uomo medio con la lucidità, la coerenza, il fascino del genio, fu un'età sostanzialmente non tragica. I chierici, i legislatori e le altre guide potevano credere in buona fede che gli eroi del secolo avessero trafitto con la spada i pescecani o i draghi della terra e del mare, e che, perfusi di quel sangue, avessero appreso il linguaggio degli alati sugli alti rami; cioè più o meno la risoluzione della Storia nell'Idea. A noi è toccato di nascere dopo [ ... ].<sup>71</sup>

This passage highlights a significant point of conflict: Croce continued to project a historical confidence that had been dashed, in the younger generations, by Fascism and the Second World War. What distanced Debenedetti and his contemporaries from Crocean historicism, I mean to say, was their experience of history.

Debenedetti's post-Crocean approach to the tragic history of the twentieth century is most evident in his '16 ottobre 1943'. This path-breaking account of the Nazi roundup of the Roman Jews, often acknowledged as the first prominent treatment of the subject in the Italian press, was published in the journal *Mercurio* in December 1944, in an issue devoted to memorializing, *in medias res*, the war and the Resistance in Italy. Tellingly, even as the journal's editors undertook to achieve this ambitious goal they called into question the very possibility of writing the history of the war. 'Difficile sarebbe [ ... ] fare oggi una storia di questa guerra sorda e sotterranea', they argued in the introduction.<sup>72</sup> The difficulty stemmed from an apparent mismatch between the nature of recent historical experience and the norms of historical narrative:

in quest'anno speciale – che ha avuto inizio per tutta l'Italia l'8 settembre e che per ogni regione o città si chiude col giorno della propria liberazione – possiamo dire di aver speso molto di noi. Il conto non può farsi oggi e del resto un certo pudore vieterebbe di farlo. Anche perché la partita singola prende corpo e valore solo se associata a quella degli altri. E gli altri, in questo caso, sono molti, e sconosciuti, e distanti. È il totale che conta, e non la cifra particolare. Ma la storia, invece, è fatta di particolari, dell'apporto minimo che ciascuno ha recato, del granello di fede, di speranza, di rischio, di tenacia che ciascuno ha bruciato.<sup>73</sup>

The editors' reticence suggests the emerging conflict between the confidence of Crocean historicism and the doubt introduced by the war, between the historian's supposed grasp of the totality of history and the witness's partial understanding of his or her particular experience. What they were attempting with this issue of *Mercurio*, we might say, was to undertake a Tolstoyan accretion of historical fact without yet abandoning their Crocean conception of historical narrative. This made the writing of history difficult, as they put it, if not impossible.

It was believed Giacomo Debenedetti had overcome this difficulty, however, and his eyewitness account was singled out by his contemporaries as a model for post-war historical narrative. As one critic put it in a 1945 essay in the journal *Società*, 'la difficoltà in cui si è trovato Debenedetti (ma che [ ... ] sarà l'eterna difficoltà di chi si mette per questa strada), fu nel rispettare i fatti e insieme nell'inquadrarli [ ... ] in un determinato

spazio-tempo che dia loro vita'.<sup>74</sup> Debenedetti thus appeared to have achieved the primary objective of historical writing in a moment of historical uncertainty.

Oggi vogliamo indugiare più a lungo sulle cose prima di generalizzarle in uno schema qualsiasi, veder chiaro nell'animo degli uomini, conoscere bontà e malvagità prima di credere all'efficacia miracolistica di un'idea qualunque sulla loro natura. [...] Per questo è indispensabile meditare sui fatti senza cercar di forzare il giudizio di nessuno. Ciascuno poi sarà portato a giudicare da sé.<sup>75</sup>

History no longer appeared to follow an established direction or to conform to any overarching idea, but that need not mean that historians had to present facts arbitrarily or unthinkingly, foreclosing on the very possibility of historical judgement. Debenedetti was commended for his judgement, and for having brought the facts of his account to life in such a way that the reader could grasp their historical significance and arrive at a critical verdict even before a complete understanding had been reached or a definitive narrative had been fixed.

Underlying this achievement was Debenedetti's recognition of his limitations, his admission of doubt, scepticism, and uncertainty. When the special issue of *Mercurio* went to press, the war was still ongoing, and information, let alone understanding, was scarce. Debenedetti, a Roman Jew, had managed to escape to Cortona in flight from Nazi persecution, but because of a chance return to the Italian capital he was present on the morning of 16 October 1943, although safely ensconced in a position that allowed him to witness, to investigate, and to record for posterity the tragedy of the city's Jewish population.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, this task was far from straightforward, and Debenedetti's essay is replete with historical confusion. Frequently, that confusion emerges through the narrator's repeated attempts to ventriloquize the confusion of his subjects: 'Che faranno di noi?', he imagines them asking. 'Che vogliono? con chi ce l'hanno? dove vanno?'<sup>77</sup> More common still are the author's expressions of his own confusion: 'Come giunsero i loro nomi alle SS?' 'Ma avrebbero poi dato retta a quell'allarme?'<sup>78</sup> These compounding doubts inspire a certain resignation before the unknowability of history. That unknowability proves to be the central point, the fulcrum, of Debenedetti's narrative. He seems to have set out to document the gap between the reality of historical events and the possibility of historical understanding. The strategy of the Nazis and the fate of the Roman Jews, he suggested, were inherently, inescapably, enigmatic. 'Torto nostro a voler cercare una regola nel più spaventoso degli arbitri'.<sup>79</sup> Even as Debenedetti accepted the moral imperative to record this historical event, he recognized that historical reality would necessarily exceed historical comprehension and could never fully be captured in the historical record.

Debenedetti's approach has thus been termed, rather unconvincingly, 'radicalmente antistoricista'.<sup>80</sup> Risa Sodi is closer to the mark when she finds in '16 ottobre 1943' early traces of microhistory, the field of historical investigation pioneered by Carlo Ginzburg.<sup>81</sup> As far as I am aware, Ginzburg himself has not identified Debenedetti as an intellectual inspiration. Yet in explaining his own historical methodology, Ginzburg nevertheless suggests several intriguing points of contact. Most significant of all is his insistence on what he has called 'l'idea, tutta novecentesca, che ho posto al centro della microstoria: e cioè che gli ostacoli frapposti alla ricerca sotto forma di lacune e

distorsioni della documentazione devono diventare parte del racconto'.<sup>82</sup> On this point, like Croce, Ginzburg takes his distance from Tolstoy, who

supera d'un balzo lo scarto inevitabile fra le tracce frammentarie e distorte di un evento (una battaglia, per esempio) e l'evento stesso. Ma questo balzo, questo rapporto diretto con la realtà può verificarsi solo (anche se non necessariamente) sul terreno dell'invenzione: allo storico, che dispone solo di tracce, di documenti, esso è per definizione precluso.<sup>83</sup>

Even as he focuses on the accretion of facts, the novelist, unlike the microhistorian, refuses to abandon the ambition to construct a totalizing narrative. Rather than Tolstoy, Ginzburg thus goes on to explain, the precursor for his notion of microhistory was Renato Serra, and in particular Serra's 'Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la Libia', which 'riprende le riflessioni di Tolstoj (senza nominarlo) ma le sviluppa in una direzione completamente diversa'.<sup>84</sup> In Serra's insistence on the necessary gap between historical fact and historical narrative Ginzburg found license for a mode of historical investigation that looked to the discrete, the particular, and even the personal in search of the truth of historical reality.

'16 ottobre 1943' offers the tantalizing suggestion that Giacomo Debenedetti had taken from Serra's essay a related lesson while arriving at a rather different conclusion. As is well known, Serra was an 'autore di culto per Debenedetti', and one Debenedetti read, on a number of occasions, against Benedetto Croce in a manner not unlike that which inspired Ginzburg's notion of microhistory.<sup>85</sup> Tellingly, Walter Pedullà both baptized Debenedetti 'l'eretico del crocianesimo' and recounted the critic's expressed ambition to be Serra ('Essere Serra').<sup>86</sup> Moreover, examining Debenedetti's 'Probabile autobiografia di una generazione' – the text in which he had expressed the need to 'uscire dal Croce per le strade da lui tracciate' – Pedullà compared the critic's preferred methodology to 'microfisica', while Romano Luperini considered it 'microfilologico'.<sup>87</sup> I do not believe Debenedetti ever employed such terms to describe his critical approach, but he did credit Renato Serra with inspiring his decision to become a literary critic.<sup>88</sup> Did Serra also inspire '16 ottobre 1943'?<sup>89</sup> One cannot and therefore should not say with certainty.

What is evident, however, is that, in compiling his account, Debenedetti, like Serra, lacked Croce's faith regarding the historian's possession of all of the necessary historical knowledge. Recognizing the inevitable absence of accurate documentation, he refused to offer any totalizing narration. In fact, he refused even to present himself as a historian. 'Io sono un critico, questo è il mio unico mestiere letterario', he wrote at the outset of his account. 'Il 16 ottobre è stato scritto da chi l'ha vissuto direttamente'.<sup>90</sup> Like Serra, therefore, whose concern was for the voices of the soldiers that would go unheard, Debenedetti pursued an account that could speak for those whose experience of history otherwise risked being silenced. The testimony he claimed to offer was not his own, then, but rather that of the community of Roman Jews targeted for extermination. In speaking on their behalf, moreover, Debenedetti acknowledged his own feelings of doubt and inadequacy, his conviction that there would inevitably remain an excess of reality, what Serra had called the 'cosa in sé', beyond the historical record.

Debenedetti's truth claims thus rested substantially – and polemically – on a series of selective departures from a set of cultural standards established by the diffusion of



Crocean historicism. Croce had postulated that 'la battaglia è conosciuta via via che si svolge'.<sup>91</sup> Debenedetti underlined what he did not know, what could not be known. Croce had said that 'noi, a ogni istante, conosciamo tutta la storia che c'importa conoscere'.<sup>92</sup> Debenedetti drew attention to what he wanted to understand but could not, what he needed to know and would not. This was a gesture of humility, but in the context of his historical account it constituted a bold claim to authority. Operating against a backdrop of Crocean historicism, with its confident faith in historical intuition, historical narrative, and historical truth, Debenedetti staked the validity of his history on an alternative standard of historical knowledge. Precisely by emphasizing what he could not know and would not say, Debenedetti was affirming the value of what he could know and had to say. Truth itself was thus made a function of his account's divergence from cultural conventions that Debenedetti no longer wished to adopt.

## Conclusion

In a recent re-assessment of the 'Probing the Limits of Representation' conference, Wulf Kansteiner and Todd Presner advanced the case that

[Hayden] White's interest in the neo-idealist philosophies of history of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile doesn't scandalize us today – as it did Ginzburg and many other readers of that exchange – for it simply recognized the *modernist* tenor of their philosophies of history.<sup>93</sup>

I do not believe Kansteiner and Presner effectively describe Ginzburg's uneasiness with White's position, which was a function less of the 'scandal' of Crocean idealism than of the limits of Crocean historicism. For Ginzburg, those limits are a function of Croce's lofty disregard for the 'cosa in sé', for the existence of a historical reality behind the available historical evidence and beyond the comprehension of the confident historian. Ginzburg thus invoked Renato Serra, in whose name he re-affirmed the reality of history, the 'cosa in sé', in order to counteract what he saw as Hayden White's Croce-inspired 'skepticism and relativism' and to re-affirm the Holocaust's undeniable facticity, a historical truth he located outside the conventions of historical narrative.

Giacomo Debenedetti posited his truth *against* the conventions of narrative history. While not dissimilar, these two approaches nonetheless differ significantly. Inspired by his lingering doubts regarding what he called Croce's 'risoluzione della Storia nell'Idea', Debenedetti struggled to envision an alternative while readily acknowledging his continuing reliance on Crocean historicism. In this, he followed in a long line of Crocean apostates, spreading back to the turn of the twentieth century, who responded to various historical crises – the Italo-Turkish War, the First World War, and the Second World War – by expressing scepticism regarding Croce's self-assured historical faith. This scepticism rarely resulted in outright rejection, tending instead to inspire attempts, as Debenedetti put it, to 'uscire dal Croce per le strade da lui tracciate'. Croce thus managed to sustain a lasting cultural hegemony despite the substantial doubt his arguments inspired. I have sought to argue that Debenedetti, compelled to work simultaneously within and against that hegemony, foregrounded his doubts in order selectively to depart from the expectations Croceanism had engendered. It was by means of those selective departures, in the form of his acknowledgments of his own



limits as a historian, the limits of the available historical evidence, and the limits of Crocean historicism, that Debenedetti sought to establish the veracity of his representation of history. Reality exists, Debenedetti might well have been saying, as Ginzburg would say more than four decades later. But reality exists, for Debenedetti, not as a fact to be discovered beyond the conventions of narrative history, as Ginzburg would argue, but instead as a truth to be articulated through critical engagement with those conventions. For those who adopt this approach, the search for historical reality and the writing of historical narrative will necessarily entail probing the limits of representation.

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## Notes

1. Hayden White, ‘Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth’, in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, ed. by Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 37–52 (p. 37).
2. A. Dirk Moses, ‘Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism, and the Public Role of History’, *History and Theory*, 44, no. 3 (2005), 311–32 (p. 316); Saul Friedländer, Introduction, in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, pp. 1–21 (pp. 2, 7).
3. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 20. A number of scholars have convincingly challenged White’s reading of Croce on the grounds that it misstates the fundamental tenets of Italian idealist historicism. Particularly cogent is Sasso’s claim that White confuses idealism with subjectivism: Gennaro Sasso, ‘La storia come “arte” e l’Olocausto (Croce, Gentile, Hayden White e Carlo Ginzburg)’, *La Cultura*, 46, no. 1 (2008), 5–60 (esp. pp. 19–21).
4. Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Just One Witness’, in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, pp. 82–96 (pp. 89, 95). On the Ginzburg–White debate, see Alfonso Musci, *Polemica sulla storia* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2012), pp. 11–12, as well as David D. Roberts, ‘The Stakes of Misreading: Hayden White, Carlo Ginzburg, and the Crocean Legacy’, in *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 237–64.
5. On the lasting cultural hegemony of Crocean historicism, see Giuseppe Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito del suo tempo* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2002), pp. 311–12; Carlo Antoni, ‘Studi sulla teoria e la storia della storiografia’, in *Cinquant’anni di vita intellettuale italiana 1896–1946: Studi in onore di Benedetto Croce per il suo ottantesimo anniversario*, ed. by Carlo Antoni and Raffaele Mattioli, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche, 1966), I, 69–92 (p. 81).
6. Ginzburg, ‘Just One Witness’, pp. 93, 95–96.
7. Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (Bari: Laterza, 1917), p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
11. On Croce’s conception of intuition, see Renata Viti Cavaliere, ‘Croce’s Theory of Historical Judgment’, in *The Legacy of Benedetto Croce: Contemporary Critical Views*, ed. by Jack D’Amico, Dain A. Trafton, and Massimo Verdicchio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 88–102 (pp. 88–89); Paolo D’Angelo, *Il problema Croce* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015), p. 87.

12. Isaiah Berlin, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', in *Russian Thinkers*, ed. by Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), pp. 22–81 (p. 30).
13. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, pp. 44–5.
14. Renato Serra, *Epistolario di Renato Serra*, ed. by Luigi Ambrosini, Giuseppe De Robertis, and Alfredo Grilli (Florence: Le Monnier, 1934), pp. 459–61 (Letter to Croce, 11 November 1912; p. 459).
15. Riccardo Caporali, 'La ragione e il pensiero ignoto. (Sul Croce di Renato Serra)', *La Cultura*, 54, no. 2 (2016), 327–48 (p. 328); Sandro Briosi, *Renato Serra* (Milan: Mursia, 1968), pp. 133–34.
16. Serra, *Epistolario*, p. 459 (Letter to Croce, 11 November 1912).
17. On this point, and on Serra's debts to Croce more generally, see Eugenio Garin, 'Serra e Croce', in *Scritti in onore di Renato Serra: Per il cinquantenario della morte*, ed. by Antonio Brasini (Florence: Le Monnier, 1974), pp. 73–92 (p. 88); Andrea Celli, "'Quando la vita ritorna': L'uso del termine *contemplazione* in Renato Serra', *Lettere italiane*, 2 (2009), 245–66 (pp. 265–66); Fausto Curi, 'Il "mondo innumerevole" e il "mondo dove niente si perde": Fenomenicità e noumenicità nel pensiero di Renato Serra', in *Il critico stratega: Saggi di teoria e analisi letteraria* (Modena: Enrico Mucchi, 2006), pp. 155–93 (p. 158).
18. Renato Serra, 'Partenza di un gruppo di soldati per la Libia', in *Scritti*, ed. by Giuseppe De Robertis and Alfredo Grilli, 2 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1938), II, 523–34 (p. 533).
19. On Serra's historical theory, see Luigi Reina, *L'inquietudine di Renato Serra* (Salerno: Libreria Internazionale, 1972), pp. 81–84; Giovanni Pacchiano, *Renato Serra* (Florence: Il Castoro, 1974), pp. 69–70; Roberto Sandrucci, *Renato Serra: La letteratura, l'educazione e la guerra* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2014), pp. 52–54; Antonio Giampietro, *Renato Serra lettore del mondo: Fra storia e mercato* (Ariccia: Aracne Editrice, 2015), pp. 79–80; Ezio Raimondi, *Un europeo di provincia: Renato Serra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), pp. 136–37; Alice Cencetti, 'Un percorso serriano dalla letteratura alla storia', *Il lettore di provincia*, 125 (2006), 55–71 (pp. 64–65); Antonietta Acciani, *Renato Serra: Contributo alla storia dell'intellettuale senza qualità* (Bari: De Donato, 1976), p. 175.
20. Serra, 'Partenza di un gruppo di soldati', p. 534.
21. Fausto Curi, 'Serra e la cultura vociana', in *Scritti in onore di Renato Serra*, pp. 113–57 (p. 138); Ezio Raimondi, *Un europeo di provincia*, p. 55. On Serra's anti-positivism (and anti-idealism), see Andrea Celli, *Corrente oscura: Scritti filosofici e formazione letteraria di Renato Serra* (Milan: Medusa, 2010), p. 91.
22. Augusto Guzzo, *Cinquant'anni d'esperienza idealistica in Italia: Cinque lezioni*. Padova, 14–18 maggio 1962 (Florence: Olschki, 1964), p. 97.
23. Leonardo Lattarulo, *Egemonia e dialogo: Croce e la cultura primonovecentesca* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 2000), p. 12. On the 'cinquantennio crociano', see Luigi Einaudi, 'La scienza economica: Reminiscenze', in *Cinquant'anni di vita intellettuale italiana 1896–1946*, II, 329–55 (p. 352).
24. Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Storia di un'amicizia*, 2 vols (Florence: Vallecchi, 1968), I, 211.
25. As Paoluzzi aptly puts it, 'lungo l'arco di mezzo secolo, l'opera intellettuale di Croce [è] stata centrale, egemone e, assieme, contrastata, combattuta, criticata': Ernesto Paoluzzi, 'Dalla polemica all'indifferenza', in *Croce tra noi: Due giornate di studio (Pescasseroli – Università di Cassino) 3–4 giugno 2002*, ed. by L. Arnone Sipari, A. Sorrentino, G. Varone (Artripalda: Mephite, 2003), pp. 17–24 (p. 18). For related claims, see Giovanni Spadolini, *Il debito con Croce* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1990), p. 76; Eugenio Garin, 'Appunti sulla formazione e su alcuni caratteri del pensiero crociano', in *Intellettuali italiani del XX secolo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987), pp. 3–31 (p. 3).
26. Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Amici* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1922), pp. 23–24. On anti-Crocean sentiment before 1925, see Emma Giammattei, *Retorica e idealismo: Croce nel primo Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987), pp. 88–89.
27. Raffaello Franchini, *Intervista su Croce*, ed. by Arturo Fratta (Naples: Società Editrice Napoletana, 1978), p. 9. On the reaction against Croce in this period, see, too, Eugenio Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana 1900/1943. Quindici anni dopo 1945/1960*, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1966), II, 489–

- 617 (p. 501); Sandro Setta, *Croce, il liberalismo e l'Italia postfascista* (Rome: Bonacci, 1979), pp. 158–60; David Ward, *Antifascisms: Cultural Politics in Italy, 1943–46: Benedetto Croce and the Liberals, Carlo Levi and the "Actionists"* (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), pp. 71–73; Enrico Ghidetti, *Il tramonto dello storicismo: Capitoli per una storia della critica novecentesca* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1993), p. 106.
28. Benedetto Croce, 'Il manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti [1 May 1925]', in *Filosofia poesia storia: Pagine tratte da tutte le opere* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1951), pp. 1056–60; Francesco Flora, 'Gli scrittori e la dittatura', in *Aretusa*, 1, no. 2 (1944), 51–67 (p. 57). On Croce's manifesto, see esp. Fabio Fernando Rizi, *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 87–91.
  29. Fabrizio Onofri, 'Irresponsabilità dell'arte sotto il fascismo', *Rinascita*, 1, no. 4 (1944), 31–35 (p. 33, emphasis in the original).
  30. Gaetano Salvemini, 'La politica di Benedetto Croce', *Il Ponte*, 10, no. 11 (1954), 1728–43 (pp. 1741–42).
  31. Lucio Lombardo-Radice, *Fascismo e anticomunismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1946), p. 27; Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, 'A che serve la storia dell'arte antica? [1944]', in *Archeologia e cultura* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1979), pp. 94–109 (p. 97).
  32. See, for example, Roberto Cantini, 'Polemica sulla nuova cultura: Approfondire ogni motivo', *Avanti!*, 10 June 1948, p. 3; Elio Vittorini, 'La dittatura dell'idealismo', in *Letteratura arte società: Articoli e interventi 1938–1965*, ed. by Raffaella Rodondi (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), pp. 210–12 (p. 211) (first publ. in *L'Unità*, 20 May 1945); E. Zazo, 'Arte e società', *Avanti!*, 29 November 1949, p. 3; Raffaele De Grada, 'Arte e fascismo', *Il '45*, 1, no. 1 (1946), 5–6.
  33. Remo Cantoni, 'La dittatura dell'idealismo', *Il Politecnico*, 38 (1947), pp. 10–13. This was the second of two articles, with the first published in *Il Politecnico*, 37 (1947), 3–6.
  34. Luigi Russo, 'La collera del Vico e la stizza del Croce. (Dalle memorie di un vecchio crociano)', *Belfagor*, 4, no. 5 (1949), 560–82 (p. 571). On Russo's break with Croce, which exemplifies the tendencies outlined in my essay both in its motivation, a fundamental disagreement over the true nature of historicism, and in its expression, as 'il Russo usava il Croce contro il Croce stesso', see Sergio Antonielli, *Letteratura del disagio* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1984), p. 252.
  35. Charles F. Delzell, 'Italian Historical Scholarship: A Decade of Recovery and Development, 1945–1955', *The Journal of Modern History*, 28, no. 4 (1956), 374–88 (p. 380). On the reaction against Crocean historicism after the war, see also Giuseppe Galasso, *Croce e lo spirito del suo tempo*, pp. 311–12; Rodolfo Montuoro, 'Il filosofo e la guerra: Benedetto Croce e il secondo conflitto mondiale', *L'Italia in guerra 1940–43*, ed. by Bruna Micheletti and Pier Paolo Poggio (Brescia: Fondazione 'Luigi Micheletti', 1990–91), pp. 853–62.
  36. Benedetto Croce, 'La libertà di coscienza e di scienza [1909]', in *Cultura e vita morale: Intermezzi polemici*, 3rd edn (Bari: Laterza, 1955), pp. 95–102 (p. 98).
  37. Croce both described Nazism as 'un problema la cui analogia o affinità con quello che nel campo più spiccatamente religioso è l'ebraico non è sfuggita a molti osservatori' and insisted that 'nel fondo dell'odio antiggiudaico dei nazisti si direbbe che ci sia una sorta di gelosia per rivalità, con questo solo divario'. Benedetto Croce, 'L'Italia nella vita internazionale', in *Scritti e discorsi politici (1943–1957)*, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1963), II, 87–104 (pp. 99–100).
  38. Croce quoted approvingly a friend who asked 'quando potrò essere di nuovo decentemente antisemita?' as part of his argument on behalf of the inherent dignity of the Italian people, who, he insisted, showed kindness and restraint even in their persecution of the Jews. Benedetto Croce, 'La "curée" delle nazioni sul corpo dell'Italia', in *Pensiero politico e politica attuale: Scritti e discorsi (1945)* (Bari: Laterza, 1946), pp. 154–57 (p. 156).
  39. For Russo's imputations of anti-Semitism to Croce, see Luigi Russo, 'La collera del Vico e la stizza del Croce', p. 569. For Togliatti's similar critique, see Palmiro Togliatti, 'Monotonia e vacuità dell'anticomunismo crociano', in *I corsivi di Roderigo: Interventi politico-culturali dal 1944 al 1964*, ed. by Ottavio Cecchi, Giovanni Leone, and Giuseppe Vacca (Bari: De Donato, 1976), pp. 154–63. On Croce's problematic response to the Holocaust, see too Roberto

- Finzi, 'Tre scritti postbellici sugli ebrei di Benedetto Croce, Cesare Merzagora, Adolfo Omodeo', *Studi Storici*, 47, no. 1 (2006), 81–108 (p. 85); Ward, *Antifascisms*, pp. 80–83.
40. Guido Ceronetti, 'Basta con lo storicismo', *Lo Stato Moderno*, 5, no. 19–20 (1948), 452–53 (p. 452).
  41. Cesare Luporini, introduction to *Dialettica a materialismo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974), p. xxviii, cited in Guido Liguori, 'La prima recezione di Gramsci in Italia (1944–1953)', *Studi storici*, 32, no. 3 (1991), 663–700 (p. 669).
  42. [Anon.], 'Ed in Arcadio ego ...', *Rinascita*, 2, no. 2 (February 1945), 64.
  43. [Anon.], Review of *La Nuova Europa, Società*, 1, no. 1–2 (1945), quoted in Romano Luperini, *Gli intellettuali di sinistra e l'ideologia della ricostruzione nel dopoguerra* (Rome: Edizioni di Ideologie, 1971), p. 62. On the competing models of post-war historicism, see Giuseppe Cacciatore, 'Lo storicismo critico-problematico della "filosofia civile" italiana', in *Lo storicismo e la sua storia: Temi, problemi, prospettive*, ed. by Giuseppe Cacciatore, Giuseppe Cantillo, and Giuseppe Lissa (Milan: Guerini, 1997), pp. 582–97 (p. 582).
  44. Lucio Lombardo Radice, 'Comunismo e cultura', *Rinascita*, 2, no. 9–10 (1945), 217–18 (p. 218). On this point, see Daniela La Penna, 'The Rise and Fall of Benedetto Croce: Intellectual Positionings in the Italian Cultural Field, 1944–1947', *Modern Italy*, 21, no. 2 (2016), 139–55 (pp. 148–50).
  45. Natalino Sapegno, 'Marxismo, cultura, poesia', *Rinascita*, 2, no. 7–8 (1945), 182–84 (p. 183).
  46. Natalino Sapegno, 'Marxismo, cultura, poesia', p. 184.
  47. Luigi Russo, 'Il marxismo e la critica letteraria', *Mercurio*, 2, no. 15 (1945), 139–41 (p. 141).
  48. Luigi Russo, 'Il marxismo e la critica letteraria', p. 139. On this debate see La Penna, 'Rise and Fall of Benedetto Croce', pp. 147–48; Giuliano Manacorda, 'Le riviste letterarie nell'immediato dopoguerra', in *Letteratura nella storia: Saggi critici dall'Ottocento ai Contemporanei*, 2 vols (Rome: Salvatore Sciascia, 1989), II, 121–36 (pp. 127–29).
  49. On the particular cross-fertilization between Communism and Crocean idealism after the war, see Romano Luperini, *Il Novecento: Apparati ideologici, ceto intellettuale, sistemi formali nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, 2 vols (Turin: Loescher, 1981), II, 370–71; Maurizio Degl'Innocenti, *Il mito di Stalin: Comunisti e socialisti nell'Italia del dopoguerra* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2005), p. 98; David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880–1980* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 158; Furio Diaz, 'La "nuova storiografia" fra impegno politico e ricerca scientifica: Momenti e problemi. 1945–1950', in *Federico Chabod e la "nuova storiografia" italiana dal primo al secondo dopoguerra (1919–1950)*, ed. by Brunello Vigezzi (Milan: Jaca Book, 1983), pp. 633–76 (pp. 637–38).
  50. Piero Caleffi, 'I giovani non sono fascisti', in *Critica Sociale*, 41, no. 8 (1949), quoted in Ugoberto Alfassio Grimaldi and Marina Addis Saba, *Cultura a passo romano: Storia e strategie dei Littoriali della cultura e dell'arte* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983), p. 20.
  51. Alberto Asor Rosa, *La cultura*, in *Storia d'Italia*, 6 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), iv.2, 1602.
  52. Franco Fortini, 'Le avanguardie della restaurazione', *Corriere della Sera*, 6 December 1976, quoted in Nello Ajello, *Intellettuali e PCI 1944–1958* (Bari: Laterza, 1979), p. 113.
  53. Eugenio Garin, 'Agonia e morte dell'idealismo italiano', in *La filosofia italiana dal dopoguerra a oggi*, ed. by A. Bausola and others (Bari: Laterza, 1985), pp. 1–29 (p. 24); Richard Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory: Ideology and Politics from Pareto to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 72.
  54. See, for instance, Pasquale Prunas, 'Avviso', *Sud*, 1, no. 1 (1945), 1–2; Renato Poggioli, 'Non programma ma proemio', *Inventario*, 1, no. 1 (1946), 1–6; [Anon.], 'Avvertenza', *Il '45*, 1, no. 1 (1946), 3–4; [Anon.], 'Per la nostra cultura', *Socialismo*, 4, no. 1–2 (1948), 17–18 (p. 17); A. Claudio Rocchi, 'Ai giovani intellettuali', *La Voce Repubblicana*, 15 May 1947, p. 3; Giovanni Titta Rosa, 'Dove va la cultura: Problema morale', *Avanti!*, 13 December 1945, pp. 1–2 (p. 1); Enzo Forcella, 'Socialismo e cultura: Gli intellettuali piccolo-borghesi', *Socialismo*, 2, no. 7–8 (1946), 193–94.
  55. Felice Balbo, report of December 1945; repr. in *Per una storia della sinistra cristiana: Documenti 1937–1945*, ed. by Pio Montesi and Mario Cocchi (Rome: Coines, 1975), pp. 33–34.

56. Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, 'Antonio Gramsci nella cultura italiana (1947)', in *Dal diario di un borghese e altri scritti* (Rome: Il Saggiatore, 1962), pp. 231–48 (p. 242).
57. Carlo Cassola, 'Reazioni sentimentali', *Il Contemporaneo*, 12 May 1956, quoted in Ajello, *Intellettuali e PCI 1944–1958*, p. 197.
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61. Gabriele Pepe, review of Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere*, *Rinascita*, 4, no. 6 (1947), 165–67 (p. 165).
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63. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana, 5 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), II, 1437 (*Quaderno* II. 18. 27). On Gramsci's historicism, see Giuseppe Cacciatore, 'Storicismo', in *Dizionario gramsciano 1926–1937*, ed. by Guido Liguori and Pasquale Voza (Rome: Carocci, 2009), pp. 814–18.
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65. Giuseppe Petronio, 'La crisi dell'idealismo e la critica letteraria', *Socialismo* 3, no. 3–5 (1947), 33–36 (p. 35).
66. Gianfranco Contini, 'L'influenza culturale di Benedetto Croce', in *Altri esercizi (1942–1971)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), pp. 31–70 (p. 31).
67. Giacomo Debenedetti, 'Probabile autobiografia di una generazione', in *Saggi*, ed. by Alfonso Berardinelli (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), pp. 97–123 (p. 110).
68. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.
69. Giacomo Debenedetti, 'Sullo "stile" di Benedetto Croce', in *Saggi*, pp. 129–40 (first publ. in *Primo Tempo*, 4–5 (1922)).
70. Giacomo Debenedetti, 'Nascita del D'Annunzio: Avvertenza per il 1941 ovvero Agitare prima dell'uso', reprinted in *Saggi*, pp. 647–59 (p. 650) (first publ. in *Argomenti*, 1, no. 1 (1941)).
71. Giacomo Debenedetti, 'Probabile autobiografia di una generazione', pp. 114–15.
72. [Anon.], 'Premessa', *Mercurio*, 1, no. 4 (Dec. 1944), 5–7 (p. 6).
73. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
74. Gianfranco Piazzesi, 'Necessità di una cronaca', *Società*, 1, no. 3 (1945), 6–9 (p. 8).
75. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
76. Paola Frandini, *Il Teatro della Memoria: Giacomo Debenedetti dalle opere e i documenti* (Lecce: Manni, 2001), pp. 163–66; Marcello Ciocchetti, *Prima di piantare datteri: Giacomo Debenedetti a Roma (1944–1945)* (Pesaro: Metauro Edizioni, 2006), p. 18.
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78. *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 45.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
80. Eleonora Forenza, 'Il "tempo" e la "figura di noi stessi": Vita e storia nella narrativa di Giacomo Debenedetti', in *La letteratura e la storia: Atti del IX Congresso Nazionale dell'ADI. Bologna-Rimini*

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81. Risa Sodi, *Narrative and Imperative: The First Fifty Years of Italian Holocaust Writing (1944–1994)* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 186.
  82. Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microstoria: Due o tre cose che so di lei', in *Il filo e le tracce: Vero falso finto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), pp. 241–69 (p. 262).
  83. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
  84. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
  85. Marcello Ciocchetti, *Prima di piantare datteri*, p. 86.
  86. Walter Pedullà, 'Dialoghi con Debenedetti', *Nuovi argomenti*, 15 (2001), 66–81 (p. 74); Walter Pedullà, *Giacomo Debenedetti, interprete dell'invisibile* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015), p. 74.
  87. Walter Pedullà, *Giacomo Debenedetti, interprete dell'invisibile*, p. 41; Romano Luperini, 'Il modello di Debenedetti nella situazione attuale della critica', *Nuovi argomenti*, 15 (2001), 267–82 (p. 278).
  88. Giacomo Debenedetti, 'A proposito di "Intermezzo"', in *Saggi*, pp. 52–53. Although he explores the relationship largely at the level of temperament, Menetti's account of Debenedetti's ties to Serra is worthy of consideration: Andrea Menetti, 'Renato Serra e Giacomo Debenedetti: La vocazione del critico', *Lettere italiane*, 65, no. 4 (2013), 519–36. See, too, Renato Bertacchini, 'Giacomo Debenedetti', in *Letteratura italiana: I critici*, ed. by Gianni Grana, 5 vols (Milan: Marzorati, 1969), V, 3397–407 (pp. 3398–400); Francesco Mattesini, *La critica letteraria di Giacomo Debenedetti* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1969), pp. 255–57.
  89. Although Debenedetti's case goes unmentioned, several critical accounts have examined the intersection of Serra's theories and Holocaust testimony. See David Bidussa, 'Testimonianza e storia: Verso la post-memoria', *La Rassegna mensile di Israel*, 70, no. 2 (2004), 1–15 (p. 1, n. 1); Massimo Lollini, *Il vuoto della forma: Scrittura, testimonianza e verità* (Genoa: Marietti, 2001), p. 112.
  90. Giacomo Debenedetti, '16 ottobre 1943', p. 27.
  91. Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, pp. 44–45.
  92. *Ibid.*
  93. Wulf Kansteiner and Todd Presner, 'Introduction: The Field of Holocaust Studies and the Emergence of Global Holocaust Culture', in *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, ed. by Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, and Todd Presner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 1–42 (p. 18).

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